DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 216 447 EA 014 620

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TITLE Vouchers Revisited: The Prospects for Education Vouchers in the Eighties.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Demography; Educational Finance; Educational Trends; *Educational Vouchers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Futures (of Society); Political Influences; Prediction; Public Schools; School Choice; *School Support; *Sociocultural Patterns

ABSTRACT

Political and social changes that have increased the public's interest in educational vouchers are summarized in three categories. The first category, new support for the arguments made by voucher advocates, includes Milton Friedman's suggestion of a free and competitive market for education, and John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman's advancement, in their book "Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control," of the benefits of allowing parents to choose their child's education. Other support for the voucher system has come from James Coleman and some prominent civil rights leaders who suggest that educational vouchers are an attractive alternative for black families. The second category, recent shifts in the political climate, encompasses Reagan's emphasis on a competitive market place, evangelical religious groups with political leanings like the Moral Majority, and taxpayer-rights groups. The third category of changes, social and demographic trends, includes the lack of support for public schools; an aging population paying an increasing portion of property tax revenues; and the white population's declining proportion of public school enrollments in the 1980s. (Author/MLF)

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Vouchers Revisited: The Prospects for Education Vouchers in the Eighties

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Paper delivered at AERA, New York, March, 1982.

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Vouchers Revisited: The Prospects For Education Vouchers In The Eighties

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Education voucher plans rise and fall in popularity and currently they are gaining popularity. This paper investigates the political and social changes that are likely to affect the public's receptivity and interest in vouchers through the early eighties. These changes can be summarized in three categories: (1) new support for the provoucher arguments, (2) recent shifts in the political climate, and (3) the effects of social and demographic trends.

In the sixties and seventies the idea of vouchers for purchasing educational services was treated as a novelty, a product of impractical academic thinking, until the federal government began to back experimental programs. By the mid-seventies a full-blown voucher system had been implemented at the Alum Rock school district in northern California. While interest in the voucher idea seemed to wane after Alum Rock, the issue is again in the public eye and has favorable prospects for affecting educational policy.

Last year in California a referendum campaign to place an educational voucher plan on the state ballot drew national attention and gave voucher supporters hope for gathering sufficient signatures this year. Due largely to unforeseen circumstances the referendum campaign has faltered this year, but the organizers are now preparing for a second major push in 1983. More importantly similar efforts have cropped up in other states. In Delaware, state representative Kevin Free submitted a bill in the 1981 legislative session proposing a state voucher plan to work for public education "in much the same way as the G.I. Bill works for higher education." In Michigan, Massachusetts, and the District of Columbia, political organizations are currently planning or have recently tried to alter the tax supports for their public and private schools.

What is behind this resurgence of interest? The political and social changes that have affected the public's interest in vouchers can be summarized in three categories: (1) new support for the arguments made by voucher advocates, (2) recent shifts in the political climate, and (3) the effects of social and demographic trends.

Philosophical Perspectives. Milton Friedman has been called the "guru of vouchers" and his statement of the fundamental issues is still the most simple and, at times, the most convincing. Friedman believes public schools suffer from the inefficiency and lack of innovation that is characteristic of monopolistic enterprises. The remedy, he suggests, is to break the hold of government on public education by introducing a free and competitive market for educational services.

In a 1973 article in the New York Times Magazine,[1] Friedman proposed that we "sell schools like groceries" and his argument was characteristically clear and persuasive: public schools are bad and getting worse and neither the field of education nor a decline in resources are to blame: it is the moribund operations of state-run educational services that is the problem. The analogy to selling groceries in the supermarkets was expecially deft since the image of breadlines and meat shortages created by the inefficiencies of centralized planning effectively drove the point home. It isn't clear if Friedman still thinks that supermarkets are similar to schools but in the seventies probably no single industry in the United States received more consumer-based criticism than the highly mechanized and frequently deceptive business of modern food processing and packaging. Finding an apt analogy for formal education is not, of course, solely Friedman's problem: it is the underlying problem that all educational policy-makers face. The efficiency argument in the meanwhile, still holds considerable force as urban schools seem to be increasingly rife with social conflict and plagued with declining test scores.

In 1978 the case for vouchers was bolstered with the publication of John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman's book, Education By Choice: The Case For Family Control.[2] Their argument centers less on the efficiency of voucher systems than on the benefits of allowing parents to choose their child's education. Who can best choose the proper education for a child, they ask, the state or the parents?

Coons and Sugarman recognize the complexity of educational voucher systems, and their proposal (which has served as the blueprint for the recent California initiative) is compelling precisely because it considers many of the likely complications. Also, unlike Friedman, they are concerned with achieving equitable as well as efficient schooling. Should schools be allowed to turn away students, to select at the schoolhouse door? This flies in the face of our common schooling heritage but Coons and Sugarman do not shy away from the prospects of greater homogeneity within schools. Allowing each school to determine its philosophy and clientele should increase the diversity of educational services available to the public at the same time individual families may be excluded from particular schools.

> "In trying to imagine how a family choice plan would work, it is too simplistic to focus solely on giving each family what it wants for its children. In some situations interests between the school provider and the family or between two families will clash...If the market for schooling were patterned after the "free" market, as it is conventionally viewed, the preference of the family would be constrained by the freedom of the school: that is, a child would be able to enroll only if the chosen school were willing to have him. Whether this power of exclusion should be eliminated is a complex issue..."[3]

The philosophical debates took a new wrinkle in the eighties when prominent civil rights leaders began to question the wisdom of pursuing school desegregation as the exclusive goal of the NAACP. Robert L. Carter, now a federal district judge in the Southern District of New York but for many years the NAACP General Counsel, has stated:

> "Integrated education must not be lost as the ultimate solution...For the present, however, to focus on integration alone is a luxury only the black middle class can afford. They have found the means to desert the public schools if dissatisfied...The immediate and urgent need of the black urban poor is the attainment, in real life terms and in settings of virtually total black-white school separation, at least of some of the benefits and protections of the constitutional guarantee of equal educational opportunity that Brown requires. The only way to insure that thousands of the black urban poor will have even a remote chance of obtaining the tools needed for them to compete in the marketplace for a decent job and its accompanying benefits is to concentrate on having quality education delivered to the schools these blacks are attending..."[4]

But how can blacks, especially poor blacks, be guaranteed an education tnat is safe, disciplined, and academically rigorous? Thomas Sowell of the Hoover Institute suggests that educational vouchers are an attractive alternative for black families that now receive substandard schooling and find the bureaucracy unresponsive, and even hostile, to the needs of the inner city poor. Derrick Bell, a former staff lawyer of the Legal Defense Fund where he personally handled almost 300 school desegregation cases in the 1960s, concedes that "vouchers may be worth trying, things are so bad now."

Among many black leaders, however, the voucher idea is still tainted with the history of white opposition to desegregated schooling. In the early days after the Brown decision, voucher legislation was

proposed and enacted in several southern communities in order to frustrate court-ordered desegregation plans. By the mid 1970s these voucher schemes had died as patterns of residential migration simply overwhelmed efforts to compel greater urban integration; it is the recognition of this stark reality that has made educational vouchers look promising to black leaders in the eighties.

Now vouchers hold a potential for change in the black community and no longer are simply seen as a means for maintaining the status quo. In at least two minority communities choice initiatives are being proposed or tried. In Boston the Black Parent Committee comprising over 200 members are pressing for a freedom-of-choice plan to replace the present court-ordered system. A poll taken in March of 1982 by the Boston Globe revealed that 79 percent of the blacks surveyed favored a free choice plan even at the expense of further racial segregation.[5] In New York's East Harlem, School District No. 4 has begun a voucher program within the public school system. The intent is clearly to weed out the worst of the lot. "Students should not be forced to go to a school that they and their parents do not think is as good as other schools," said Anthony Alvarado, the District Superintendent.[6] To James Coleman, it is particularly the low income minority family that stands to benefit from free-choice initiatives: "[the present system] hurts most the low income family that is least able to leave a bad public school and the black family that confronts the greatest barrier to move elsewhere."[7]

Coleman's recent research on public and private schools is especially germane to the voucher arguments.[8] Critics of voucher plans commonly hold that family choice would inevitably lead to greater social and class segregation between schools. But Coleman found that Catholic schools not only outperform public schools, they also are as a group less racially segregated (when analyzed as dispersion within the group).

Immediately after the public/private school report became public, several critics pointed to flaws in the research design and data analysis.[9] Some researchers have even dismissed the study entirely for the purposes of policy-making. Coleman in turn has responded by complementing the empirical findings with a critical analysis of public schooling.[10] Specifically, Coleman feels that private school tuition is a "protective tariff" that users must pay in addition to the taxes for free public schools. This tariff originally served to support the common-school ideal once embodied in the public school system. But society has since changed and the assumptions on which the public school apparatus was erected no longer hold. For example, Coleman points out that the expansion of personal transportation and the development of extensive suburbs has only led to elaborated layers of economically stratified neighborhoods in every metropolitan area. With school assignments tied to residential patterns the effect has been to turn the common-school ideal into a system of economically stratified and racially distinct schools. The effect of the protective tariff for public schooling, argues Coleman, is harmful to the consumers of education by restricting their ability to choose and seek out a quality education.

Political Currents. George La Noue in a collection of essays about vouchers in 1972 predicted it would take a coalition of conservative social and political groups for the voucher idea to appear anywhere on the political agenda.[11] There is reason to believe the current political establishment may favor more choice in education.[12] On the campaign trail, Ronald Reagan discussed the idea of using "chits" (or vouchers) as an alternative means for financing public education, and in principle it is clear that this administration is likely to favor the idea. Reagan's economic goals all fit comfortably with educational voucher plans: less state intervention, greater incentives for private initiative, and generally an emphasis on the rigor and safeguards of a competitive market place.

Two groups in Reagan's political coalition stand to benefit from vouchers: evangelical religious groups with political yearnings like the Moral Majority and taxpayer-rights groups. If vouchers were allowed to finance the religiously-based schools in the burgeoning Christian school movement, the fundamentalist organizations, whose political fortunes have already risen, would receive a substantial boost toward their social goals. Coons believes vouchers could legally serve this purpose: "The U.S. Supreme Court has never passed judgement upon any system closely resembling the California Initiative for Family Choice...There is every reason to think that it would be permissible for family choice schools to teach religion, if they wished to do so."[13]

The taxpayer-rights groups also back voucher proposals. While these groups are more often identified with tuition tax credits than vouchers, both reforms share the essential aspect of allowing the taxpayer greater discretion in his consumption of education. During this session the U.S. Senate is scheduled to consider the Packwood-Moynihan bill which establishes tuition-tax credits for parents with children in proprietary and parochial schools. Legislative analysts do not feel the bill will have much impact on parents' decisions between public or private schooling, since the amount of tax credit ($250 for the first year, $500 in the third) is low relative to the costs of private schooling.[14] For this reason, opponents argue, the tax-credit bill, if passed, will do little more than benefit the affluent families already enrolled in private schools. The bill's backers see the issue as a matter of taxpayers' rights. Their rationale is that government should encourage parents' efforts to further their children's education whether parents choose private or public schools. Federal tax policy, they point out, encourages home ownership because in principle the government feels home ownership is desirable despite the greater savings this brings to families of predominately moderate and high incomes. The issue is not equity, but rights.[15]

Social, Demographic and Economic Trends. An editorial in Kappan noting recent trends asked: "What happens to the public schools when two-thirds of the taxpayers (and voters) are dissatisfied with them?

Bond issues fail. Tax levies are defeated. State legislators enact proposition 13-type initiatives." If bond issues are a valid indication, taxpayers are indeed rebelling against the rising costs of education. Figures from the National Center for Educational Statistics show that in 1957 public school bond issues were approved 73 percent of the time, yet by 1977 the rate had declined to 54 percent.[16] In one school district in Delaware a recent bond issue was defeated by 9 to 1. For several reasons public schooling is, indeed, experiencing a period of retrenchment as schools are closed, teachers and other personnel lose their jobs, and educational programs are cut. School authorities in Alpena, Michigan closed the public schools in October of 1981 because the school system had run out of money two months into the academic year.[17] Anticipating a teachers' strike in the summer of 1981, Philadelphia Mayor Bill green stated the financial delemma in blunt terms: "Given the limits imposed by our present revenues, unless something gives, the schools in Philadelphia will not open this fall."

Vouchers become attractive for city officials under these circumstances for two reasons. First, since vouchers should reflect supply and demand conditions, the price of educational services (and the quality) would automatically fall in line with the tax monies local citizens who are willing to give to education. This could alleviate the financial bind of many large urban school systems that are currently on the brink of bankruptcy. And, secondly, since private schools operate on roughly one-half the revenues of public schools, vouchers have the potential for makiing schooling, or at least the basics of schooling, less expensive.

Laura Salganik has identified two demographic changes that are likely to affect constituent support for public education. First, older couples who are less likely to have school-age children are paying an increasing portion of the property tax revenues that support the public schools. Furthermore, in the eighties, the white majority will have fewer school-age children and those children will be a declining proportion of public school enrollments. At the same time, Reagan's budget cuts notwithstanding, there is little reason to expect the demand for special needs programs will decrease. These forces, Salganik maintains, will lead to growing disaffection among the majority of taxpayers supporting public schooling.

Conclusion. Prognosis in matters of public policy is always an uncertain business but it appears that voucher advocates should soon enjoy an increasingly receptive political and social climate in the early eighties. Oddly enough the voucher idea in the sixties was favored by social critics on both extremes of the political spectrum. To the new left vouchers offered the prospect of bringing neighborhood control to city schools that discriminated against minorities and the urban poor. The "immoderate right" on the other hand wanted to break the stagnant monopoly of public education and encourage educational choice and competition.

For a number of reasons, not the least of which was the resistence of the educational community, experimental voucher plans were tried in

the seventies and failed. The difference between the early seventies and the eighties is that both political and social changes may now make the voucher idea more tenable to a new coalition of fiscal and social conservatives. To the old arguments against monopoly practices comes new interests in fiscal constraint and for individual choice in social values and quality schooling. Harvey Averch in surveying the literature on school effects concluded: "Research tentatively suggests that improvement in student outcomes, both cognitive and noncognitive, may require sweeping changes in the organization, structure, and conduct of educational experience."[18] Voucher proponents feel that their ideas could achieve just that, and they may soon get a chance to find out.

Footnotes

1. Milton Friedman, "The Voucher Idea: Selling Schools Like Groceries," The New York Times Magazine, 23 September 1973.

2. John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman, Education By Choice: The Case for Family Control (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

3. Ibid., p. 134.

4. Robert C. Carter, "A Reassessment of Brown vs. Board," in Shades of Brown: New Perspectives on School Desegregation, Derrick Bell, ed., (New York: Teachers College), p. 29.

5. "A 'Free Choice' Plan for Boston Schools," Newsweek, 5 April 1982, p. 13.

6. Gene I. Maeroff, "Harlem District, in New Move, to Let Pupils Choose Junior High to Attend," The New York Times, 22 March 1982, p. B5.

7. James Coleman, "Public Schools, Private Schools, and the Public Interest," The Public Interest, #64, Summer 1981, p. 29.

8. James S. Coleman, Sally Kilgore and Thomas Hoffer, Public and Private Schools (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 1981).

9. Special issues of Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 51, #4, November 1981, Society, Vol. 19, #2, January-February 1982, Sociology of Education, (forthcoming), and Kappan, Vol. 63, #3, November 1981, are devoted to the Coleman, Kilgore, and Hoffer Report.

10. See especially "Quality and Equality in American Education: Public and Catholic Schools," in Kappan, Vol. 63, #3, November 1981, and "Public Schools, Private Schools, and the Public Interest," ibid.

11. George La Nove, "Vouchers: The End of Public Education," in Educational Vouchers: Consepts and Controversies, edited by George La Nove, (New York: Teachers College Press).

12. See the statement of T. H. Bell, Secretary of Education, before the Subcommittee on Taxation and Debt Management Committee of Finance, United States Senate, 4 June 1981. Also see George Neill, "President Reagan Values Education, Meese Proclaims," Education Week, 21 December 1981, p. 1.

13. John E. Coons, "Of Family Choice and 'Public' Education," Phi Delta Kappan, September 1979, pp. 10-13.

14. "Tax Credits Unlikely to Benefit Low-Income Families, Congressional Budget Office Says," in Report on Education Research, 4 March 1981. See also James Catterall, "Tuition Tax Credits for Schools: A Federal Priority for the 1980s?," Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance, Stanford University, and John L. Esty, Jr., "A Defense of Tuition Tax Credits--for the Poor," in Education Week, 10 March 1982, for opposing points of view.

15. See Marc Plattner, "The Welfare vs. the Redistributive State," The Public Interest, Spring 1979, for a general discussion of tax equity issues.

16. National Center for Educational Statistics, 1980 Digest, Table 65.

17. Glen Macow, "Hard Times Threaten Public Schools in Michigan, Education Week, 17 March 1982.

18. Harvey A. Averch, Stephen J. Carroll, Theodore S. Donaldson, Herbert J. Kiesling, and John Pincus, "How Effective is Schooling? A Critical Review and Synthesis of Research Findings," The Rand Corporation, R-956-PCSF/RC, March 1972, p. 158.